

Chapter - 9

Public Use & Education

1. Background and Existing Use

The Chesapeake Forest Lands have traditionally, been hunted (primarily for deer) by over 200 organized hunt clubs, many of these Clubs have continually leased these lands since the 1960's. The Department chose to continue this use during the transitional period that lasted for three years and which recently ended in December of 2003. These clubs had permission to hunt individual tracts for a period of three years under a right-of-entry (ROE) agreement that was developed by the Department. The agreements identified the terms, under which the tracts could be hunted, specified a cost for this privilege and conditions of use, which need to be followed. When the Chesapeake Forest lands were acquired, there were 223 ROE agreements on a total of 54,962 acres of Chesapeake Forest (94.4% of the total land area). Of these, 141 agreements totaling 29,448 acres were on the gifted lands managed by Vision Forestry through a contract with the Department. The remaining 82 ROE agreements totaling 25,514 acres were on lands managed by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

These ROE agreements have provided an important source of revenue (estimated to be \$350,000/year), which helped support management and payments to local governments. The hunt clubs have also provided important services in terms of land management, such as maintaining roads and trails, minimizing trespass, reporting illegal dumping or other activities, etc. All of these ROE agreements expired in the Spring of 2004.

2. Future Use

Recreational surveys both nationwide and locally indicate that outdoor recreational activities such as hiking, camping, wildlife viewing, hunting, fishing, canoeing and kayaking continue to be popular and their pursuit continues to play a major role in Maryland's economic growth and tourism industry. Based on this information and the intent of the acquisition, the goal for public use *"is to provide opportunities for the enjoyment of the natural resources of the Chesapeake Forest lands by making appropriate areas available for resource-based, low impact recreation and environmental education for a variety of user groups provided this use is compatible or does not conflict with the other goals of the project."* Therefore, all future public use proposals will be evaluated to determine their compatibility with:

- the implementation of sustainable forest management;
- the conservation of wildlife;
- the conservation of plant and animal habitats and other sensitive areas;
- the maintenance of water quality;
- and the protection of cultural resources.

The primary types of public use to be encouraged on the Chesapeake Forest lands include activities such as hiking, hunting, fishing, birding, horseback riding, nature/wildlife observation, environmental education, primitive camping, trapping and

access for canoeing and kayaking. In select cases, minimal development may be undertaken to provide picnicking, camping at primitive sites, bike trails and recreational opportunities targeted for seniors and the disabled.

Hunting:

As mentioned earlier, deer populations must be managed to ensure a healthy forest. Therefore, hunting opportunities will be provided to limit population growth and ensure the protection of the forest and other habitat areas. This plan attempts to identify the proper combination of public and limited-access hunting of the forests by private hunt clubs as well as other appropriate recreational uses. There are strong constituencies and feelings on all sides. Now that the lands are in public hands, there are many people who feel that the public should have access. Others recognize that the services provided by the hunt clubs save the Department money through their activities involving road maintenance, gate installation, trash pick-up, or boundary line marking and posting. Many of these benefits were identified by the clubs at a series of three public meetings conducted by the Department in April 2000. Approximately 680 people (primarily hunt club members) attended these meetings and provided a wealth of information (see Appendix G for a Summary). Based on this input and discussion with staff, the Department developed a set of criteria to use to evaluate the suitability of the Chesapeake Forest tracts for public use, including hunting (Appendix H).

In 2002, the Department began a public planning process by forming a Citizens Advisory Committee. This group consisting of diverse representatives from the forestry, conservation and recreational community began to develop a Plan for Chesapeake Forest by reviewing the Sustainable Forest Management Plan (SFMP) developed by the Sampson Group. The SFMP for the gifted lands did not address the issue of public access to the Chesapeake Forest lands. However, the terms of the "Acceptance of Gift" agreement did include, among other obligations, that *"the existing hunting licenses, which shall be renewed annually for three (3) terms of one-year each in order to transition the Property from private to public use through a planning process."* These ROE agreements on the gifted lands, along with the remaining 82 ROE agreements on the 25,514 acres of DNR purchased lands were extended in 2001 to June 30, 2004, as a way to maintain a consistent approach,. In addition, at their second monthly meeting, the Citizens Advisory Committee agreed that hunting was a traditional and appropriate use of Chesapeake Forest and approved the public use suitability criteria

In 2002, while the Department's planning process was still underway, the Maryland General Assembly enacted SB 599, Natural Resources-Hunting and Licenses and Stamps, which was amended (on the recommendation of Delegate Kenneth Schisler, District 37B) to include Section 3: *"(1) it is the intent of the General Assembly that, in accordance with Sections 10-209 and 10-308.1 of the Natural Resource Article, the Department of Natural Resources utilize special fund revenue generated as a result of the licensing fee increases under this Act, as appropriate, in order to open to public hunting at least half of the total acreage that is leased for hunting to private individuals on the properties known as the Chesapeake Forest lands by the 2005-2006 hunting season."*

As a first step in meeting the requirements of SB-599, the Department opened several tracts during 2002 for public use. These tracts include, the Ventor and Lathrop tracts, which comprise 455 acres in Wicomico County. They encompass a hiking trail that demonstrates various forest practices, however this area is not open to public hunting, due to possible conflicts in use.

The DeWolf, Osborne, and Mansion Farm tracts in Dorchester County, the Cordrey and Whitesburg tracts in Worcester County, which total 1,553 acres, were open to public hunting as well as other uses. The Buck Harbour tract in Worcester County totaling 318 acres was also opened for hunting, but is restricted to wheel chair access through an agreement with the Wild Turkey Federation. In this first year, the Department had decided not to impact any existing club agreements, so no hunt clubs occupied any of the tracts identified above.

In the 2004 Legislative Session, two additional bills relating to hunting on Chesapeake Forest were introduced and ultimately failed. As a result of the legislative and public deliberations, a consideration of numerous alternatives and in accordance with the intent of SB 599, the Department decided to implement a hunting program that is a combination of public and club hunting. Using the approved suitability criteria, tracts suitable for public use were identified. These tracts will be opened over a two-year period in order to be able to develop parking areas, mark boundaries and install gates, with 12,178 acres opened for the 2004/2005 hunting season and 13,897 acres to be opened for the 2005/2006 hunting season. On the remaining tracts, the hunt clubs that previously had ROE agreements are being offered an opportunity to lease the same tracts for a five-year period. As Clubs decide to give up their lease, these Chesapeake Forest tracts will go into a lottery system to be made available to other Hunt Clubs.

Hiking, Biking Horseback Riding and Nature Observation:

Although hunting is anticipated to be the most popular activity, the extensive forest road system that currently exists on the Chesapeake Forest offers ample opportunities for hiking, biking, horseback riding and nature observation. These activities will be encouraged on the tracts opened for public use provided there are not user conflicts and all the other forest management goals are being met. There is an existing forest demonstration trail on the Tommy Tyler Complex (Ventor/Lathrop tracts) across the river from the Town of Vienna. The tracts of Chesapeake Forest surrounding Wicomico Demonstration Forest also present opportunities to extend the existing trail system.

Water Access for Canoeing, Kayaking and Fishing:

Opportunities for water access are somewhat limited on Chesapeake Forest. However, some of the tracts along Nanticoke appear to offer possible access/take out points as part of an “interpretive” water trail being developed. The Department should continue to evaluate the feasibility of access on the Marshyhope Complex and the King’s Misfortune tract. As part of an interpretive water trail, these locations could be used to highlight forestry’s connection to the Chesapeake Bay. In addition, the Lewis Tract in

Dorchester County may offer access opportunities to the Fishing Bay water trail and these should be explored.

3. Education and Public Outreach

The Department's goal for Chesapeake Forest is that it will be viewed as a national model of sustainable forest management, and that the Department will increase the public's awareness concerning the importance of sustainable forest management and its connection to the health of the Chesapeake Bay. The Forest is seen as a "living laboratory" or "outdoor classroom" where resource professionals and the public can learn. Therefore, education and the development of forest management demonstration areas will be very important. This goal will be achieved by:

- the continuation and constant update of the Chesapeake Forest website;
- the development of brochures and other written material about the Forest;
- and, the provision of tours and other public forums for educating the public about the Forest.

Chesapeake Forest Website:

The website (<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/forests/chesapeakeforests/>) has been and will continue to be an invaluable mechanism for communicating with the public. It has been used to share information regarding the planning process and the opening of tracts to the public. However, its future value is dependent on the Department's ability to continually update the information.

Educational Material:

The Department should consider the placement of interpretive markers or informational kiosks at the public use areas experiencing the highest visitation. These kiosks would include a map and information on the Forest and sustainable forest management. One example of this approach is found at the self-guided forest demonstration trail on the Tommy Tyler Complex. The Department is currently updating the educational trail guide by developing information emphasizing sustainable forest management. The Department should also consider the development of a CD-ROM that contains information about the forest, its resources and the connection to the Bay. This could be a cooperative effort between the Forest Service, the Wildlife and Heritage Service, the State Forest and Park Service and Vision Forestry.

Tours and Forums

The Department should sponsor forest management field days that educate the public in the values of sustainable forest management and working landscapes. These field days could be targeted to the public that are using the Forest as a way for them to be educated and understand the Department's approach to forest management and the relationship of their use to this management. The Department should continue to

sponsor cooperative research projects as part of the implementation of the Monitoring Plan (see Chapter 12). Possible partners could include universities such as Salisbury University and the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, private non-profit organizations like the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and local community service organizations. In addition, the Department should involve the Maryland Conservation Corps, local school groups, scouting organizations and local environmental groups in the implementation of projects identified in the Annual Work Plan (AWP).

4. Implementation

As with the other management activities, recreational and educational activities will be included as proposals within the Annual Work Plan (AWP). These activities will be reviewed by the Chesapeake Forest interdisciplinary team and once reviewed and approved will be implemented as part of the AWP. Public use activities will also be monitored to ensure there is not conflict with the other management goals or degradation of the sensitive resources found on the forest. Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) procedures and protocols will be used to monitor these public use activities (see Monitoring Plan – Chapter 10).

